In China, Adventist believers display spirit of service, sacrifice
Humble beginnings for Beiguan Church; Member donations fund construction

In Guatemala, major evangelism push yields thousands of new members
Burgeoning growth could mean more resources, infrastructure for mission

Church Chat: For Adventist blind ministry, cutbacks kindle new growth
Pitcher on camps for the blind, new digital library and service-minded ministry

In China, Adventist believers display spirit of service, sacrifice
The young man looked left to make sure that he was perfectly lined up with his coworkers. Then he straightened his tie.

“We have been looking forward to this visit from Adventist church leaders for a very long time,” student Elisha Ding said. Ding is one of over one hundred young people being trained for ministry at the Beiguan Adventist Church in Shenyang, in the northern Chinese province of Liaoning.

Dressed in black suits, young men and women lined the walkway singing songs of welcome as a delegation from Adventist world church headquarters walked towards the church for evening worship. Led by world church President Ted N. C. Wilson, the delegation was on an official ten-day visit to China to meet church members and local leaders.

“The foundation of the Beiguan Church is based on service and sacrifice,” said Adventist world church Secretary G. T. Ng. “This church needs an enormous number of workers to run these church plants because they don’t have a formal church system,” he added.

Young people are trained for one year and during this time are given various responsibilities by their supervisors. After one year the best students are hand picked for additional theological training. Some students are also sent abroad as missionaries to various countries.

“All our students are self-supporting and need to fund themselves,” said Hao Ya Jie, church and school leader.

Beiguan Church had humble beginnings with twenty members meeting in someone’s home. Later, they shared a church in downtown Shenyang, later rented a church and finally had enough savings to build their own four-story building.

Many members took savings that they had kept for their children’s education and donated this to the church. People also gave much of their retirement savings. With winter approaching, construction workers needed to pour the concrete for the main pillars of the church in time to prevent cracking.

“The concrete had just been poured when a cold front passed causing great concern,” said Chinese Union President David Kok Hoe Ng. “Most church members brought their blankets from home and wrapped these around the pillars to save the building. It was quite a sight to see all these brightly colored blankets,” he added.

Today, the Beiguan Adventist Church has more than 3,000 members and has generated numerous church plants totaling another 7,000 members. Every morning at 5 a.m., 365 days a year, church
members come to the church to pray.

“The winters in the north are very cold and sometimes there are not too many people, but there are always at least one hundred members praying every morning,” Ng said.

Wilson reminded church members that God is calling them to carry on the work of revival and reformation. “You are a vital part of God’s worldwide people who are moving towards the Second Coming of Christ, a destiny that Christ himself has provided,” Wilson said.

The day before, the delegation visited the cultural city of Hangzhou, where Wilson greeted church members at Meilizhou Church inside an upmarket resort development.

This church also came about through sacrifice and the commitment and vision of key church members. A church elder and businessman saw an opportunity and contacted a friend who was a property developer. He told him that his resort had almost everything but one important element – a church.

The church elder contributed 25 percent of the funding and the developer paid the rest to build a church centrally located in the upmarket resort. Meilizhou Church’s membership is growing steadily as it serves the surrounding community.

"It is incredible to see the way our members are sacrificing their time and means to move forward the work of the Lord," said Adventist world church Treasurer Robert E. Lemon. "To see how our members have been able to build such a strong and vibrant church based almost completely on local volunteer support is thrilling."

The churches in China are a testament to God’s blessings when members are willing to sacrifice time, talents and money.

In Guatemala, major evangelism push yields thousands of new members

In Guatemala, five pastors baptize new Adventist Church members in Lake Atitlan in Panajachel on April 1. The baptisms were part of meetings in which church leaders from throughout Central America met in Guatemala to coordinate mass efforts of sharing
The Central American country of Guatemala has been playing host to big evangelism efforts by both training evangelists and holding local campaigns, which have yielded results in thousands of new members.

Leaders for the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s Inter-American Division held an evangelism training summit earlier this month to coincide with the culmination of local efforts.

The Adventist Church in Guatemala has been evangelizing aggressively this year, holding more than 1,000 campaigns resulting in nearly 5,000 baptisms in three months, said Gustavo Menendez, Personal Ministries director for the church in Guatemala.

This month’s training summit brought together about 50 pastors for continuing education on conducting public evangelism.

The bulk of local campaigns have also included leadership by lay members. The Adventist Church’s Vision 60,000 program here is part of the division’s call to involve 1 million lay members for discipleship building.

Abraham Tzic, field secretary of the 16,000-member Northwest Adventist Mission office in Totonicapan, said 1,200 active church members have registered in the discipleship program since October of 2011. The region aims to have 3,000 by the end of this year.

Like many ministers in the region, Tzic pastors more than 25 churches.

With a shortage of pastors, Vision 60,000 has drawn more participation from church members and laypeople who have taken it upon themselves to reach those around them with the gospel, with positive results, said Guenther Garcia, president of the Adventist Church in Guatemala.

“So far, this has been a record-breaking year for Guatemala,” Garcia said.

A baptism of more than 300 people in Lake Atitlan on April 1 drew spectators to see the results of their months-long efforts to bring the gospel to their friends and neighbors. The Adventist Church in Guatemala typically holds a mass baptism in the lake each year on the last Sunday of the first quarter, Menendez said.

The fast growth of the church in Guatemala has local and national church leaders talking of upgrading three mission offices to “conference” level status, meaning the administrative region would be financially self-sustaining. Two experimental regions could also be soon upgraded to “mission” status, which would put in place a leadership team for churches in the territory.

There are nearly 240,000 Adventists in Guatemala worshipping in 950 congregations. The church also operates 27 primary and secondary schools in the country.
Church Chat: For Adventist blind ministry, cutbacks kindle new growth

Christian Record Services for the Blind President Larry Pitcher oversees a burgeoning ministry to the blind and low-sight community from headquarters in Lincoln, Nebraska. [photo: Rajmund Dabrowski]

A guide accompanies a blind skier at a recent Christian Record camp in Winter Park, Colorado. The ministry currently runs 11 National Camps for Blind Children. [photo: Ed Horan]

Christian Record manages one of the largest denominational audio lending libraries in North America. Here, an employee prepares to distribute one of the more than 2,200 audio cassettes and
Christian Record Services for the Blind President Larry Pitcher is enthusiastic about a young Nebraska teen’s efforts to send 13 blind children to summer camp this year.

After Christian Philson raised more than $4,500 toward his goal at a local pancake breakfast, the legendary Harlem Globetrotters named the 13-year-old an honorary Ambassador of Goodwill. Autographed memorabilia from the team for a fundraising raffle will further benefit his project.

Pitcher says what Philson is doing on a small scale illustrates what the Nebraska-based charity stands for – Christian ministry anchored in the community.

Established by the Adventist Church in 1899, Christian Record Services for the Blind offers a library of Braille, large print publications and audio recordings to a potential audience of 39 million blind and low sight people in United States. The ministry also operates a system of camps for blind children across North America.

At the helm of Christian Record since 1995, Pitcher has steered the ministry toward efficiency. He oversaw cutbacks ahead of the 2008 economic downturn, trimming Christian Record’s annual budget to $4.2 million, down from $6.1 million. The tighter focus, he says, is kindling growth and drawing a new brand of service-minded employees to the ministry.

Most recently, Christian Record began transferring its library from audio cassette to digital cartridge technology used by the U.S. Library of Congress. The ministry has ambitious plans to put digital players stocked with encouraging, relevant content in the hands of veterans of the Iraq and Afghan wars who have suffered eye damage in the line of duty.

Pitcher spoke with ANN ahead of the ministry’s April 14 annual offering. The Chicago native discussed the growing Missionaries to the Blind program and the challenges involved in offering camps to the blind. Excerpts:

**Adventist News Network**: What will this coming Saturday’s offering fund?

**Larry Pitcher**: Donations from church members will go toward Seventh-day Adventist-specific publications. For example, we have the New Believer Bible study guides we’re preparing for the North American Division. They’re brand new. These are Sabbath School lessons designed for people who’ve just been baptized. The offering will also help support a new audio version of The Great Hope – the condensation of The Great Controversy [by church co-founder Ellen G. White]. In terms of our funding, about 75 percent of our annual budget comes from individual and corporate donors outside of the church. So the money that does come from the church, we want to use for Seventh-day Adventist-specific projects. This way, we can assure the Baptist or Catholic donor that their money is going toward the general Christian aspect of our ministry.

**ANN**: Is it difficult to maintain a distinctly Adventist ministry when so much of your funding comes from outside the church?

**Pitcher**: It is hard to target, but what we do is divide our mission work. If a blind person wants to know about Seventh-day Adventists, we have that material. We also offer general Christian material
designed to encourage and inspire and to inform. A third category is just good, clean Christian reading. You don’t have to worry about sex and violence. We also have health-related publications, like Dynamic Living by Dr. Hans Diehl. That’s not specifically Seventh-day Adventist. And the same is true with some of our other material that has to do with issues of, say, marital conflict or raising children. In terms of people we serve with our publications, only 12 percent of our nearly 20,000 subscribers are Seventh-day Adventists. So we’re missionary minded. We’re Seventh-day Adventists facing the Christian and non-Christian communities. We’re a bridge.

ANN: Christian Record has recently expanded its Missionaries to the Blind ministry. What’s the idea behind this program?

Pitcher: We started Missionaries to the Blind about seven years ago to connect with the hundreds of thousands of blind people who receive Christian Record publication or who have attended our camps. We train church members to befriend people who are receiving our publications. After these Missionaries to the Blind volunteers are screened and trained, they get two or three names to contact, and they simply strike up a conversation. They offer more resources and create a friendship. Maybe the person needs transportation help. Maybe they’re lonely and want someone to talk to. We encourage the missionaries to invite the blind to church functions, like a picnic, a concert or a holiday event. Quite a few people began visiting church regularly through this program, and of those, we’ve had baptisms. Currently, we have 400 volunteers in the U.S. visiting about 1,100 people. We also serve a few hundred clients In India. In Egypt, there are a few more hundred. Australia, too.

ANN: To what degree are Adventists attuned to the needs of the visually impaired community?

Pitcher: Few people are actually very acquainted with Christian Record Services for the Blind. They’ve heard of it, but they’re not acquainted with it like they are with Voice of Prophecy, or It Is Written. It’s more like, ‘Well, I know what that is, but it’s for the blind.” So our purpose when we go to the churches is to share the vast missionary work that we’re doing with the Braille publications, the large print, the audio, the website, the lending library, the camps for the blind and the Missionaries to the Blind. And then I ask people to join the Missionaries to the Blind, be part of our task force of volunteers.

ANN: Ahead of the economic downturn, Christian Record cut back the National Camps for Blind Children from 24 to 10 per year. You’re back up to 11 camps this summer. What factors are still influencing camp attendance?

Pitcher: Two things have impacted us, not the least of which are new privacy issues. You can’t get a list of blind people on the Internet, nor can you get a list of blind people from most of the agencies that serve the blind anymore. We used to be able to go to schools of the blind. But many states have mainstreamed blind students into public schools. So now you’ve got to find them individually and connect with them, which is time consuming and expensive. Secondly, if they’re a minor, you have to convince the individual of low vision or blindness, plus the parents. Not all parents, believe it or not, are willing to let their kids go off to some camp they don’t know anything about. So parents want to investigate, they want to see the camp in action and make sure everything’s safe. The Seventh-day Adventist camps that we choose are accredited by both the American Camping Association and the Adventist Association of Camping Professionals.

ANN: What has changed at Christian Record over the past decade?

Pitcher: The biggest change is that we’ve become more technologically savvy to improve our
services to the blind while reducing costs. I’ve also seen an improvement in the quality of people who want to serve in this ministry. People who are professional, dedicated, ministry-loving, wanting to serve, wanting to help people. These are people who could work somewhere else and make more money at less effort, but we do this because we’re committed to the ministry. Most of our department heads all have their master’s degrees. They don’t have to work here. But when people want to do things for the Lord, and they want to impact people’s lives, this is one way they can do it. And they see the difference.

**ANN:** What does Christian Record offer that isn’t available anywhere else?

**Pitcher:** Our vision statement is simple: We help the blind see Jesus. It is by seeing Jesus that hope and health and healing comes to the individual. As people join our ministry they realize that we are enabling people to independently experience Jesus Christ though our publications, through our Missionaries to the Blind and through our camps. This ministry is vital because Jesus said go into all the world and we have here in the U.S., for example, 39 million people with major vision problems, from cataracts, to RP [Retinitis pigmentosa], to detached retina, to total blindness. There’s about 10 major causes of blindness. But 39 million people is a lot of people. And it’s growing as the population ages.

-- Find out more about Christian Record Services for the Blind at christianrecord.org.

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